



## SANTA MARVIN

BY BEAU DENTON

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The sun rose early on Black Friday, heralding the official beginning of the Christmas season for Harbor Hills Mall. Turkeys, cornucopias, and decorative pilgrims with black hats were replaced by pine trees, cotton snow, and giant boxes with colorful bows. Employees greeted each other with nods and tight-lipped grins as they rolled open the gates in front of each store, every corner of the mall ringing with the advent of songs about bells and chestnuts and Jesus.

Marvin Griggs woke up at 5:30 to prepare himself. The president of the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, Marvin knew it was crucial he fulfill his reputation as the most respected mall Santa in the tri-county area. He arrived as early as possible, stepping into his makeshift dressing room in the storage area behind American Eagle. He spent an hour making sure his new red pants and coat were lint-free, his beard was the perfect mixture of fullness and wispiness, and the top of his hat angled appropriately to the right side of his head.

After his prerequisite grooming, Marvin began his walk through the mall to survey his domain. He waved at

the man in the Discovery Store and visited briefly with the young lady at the Cingular kiosk. He hesitated after noticing a North Pole sign pointed toward the east wing. Marvin looked for someone to explain the change in placement, but kept walking after seeing only a Brookstone clerk. He forgot his confusion, though, when he rounded the corner and recognized the ornate display resting in the courtyard in front of Sears. A toy train circled a golden throne with red velvet cushions, rolling through the cotton mountains and tunneling under steps that connected the spectacle to the carpeted waiting area. A pair of ropes zigzagged across the carpet, ready to corral the throngs of eager children and impatient parents. An arched sign marked the entrance to the line with gold letters reading “North Pole.” The entire display was layered with strings of twinkling white lights that danced in Marvin’s eyes.

A middle-aged security guard with acne glided up to Marvin on a Segway. “Good morning, Santa Marvin.”

“Merry Christmas, Al.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Al said with a smile.

“Sure is. It gets me every year.” Marvin wiped a gloved hand across his eyes. After a few more seconds of silence and smiles, he turned to Al. “Do you know why we’re down here this year?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is my ninth year here, and I’ve been in front of Dillard’s every time. Why’d they set it up in the east wing this year?”

“Oh don’t worry, Santa Marvin. You’ll still be in front of Dillard’s. This is for Santa Stan.”

Beads of sweat dotted Marvin’s forehead. “Who?”

“Ho, ho, ho!” A skinny, clean-shaven man in a red jumpsuit walked up behind Marvin and extended his hand. “Stanley Altman, American Santa Society. Pleased to meet you.”

Marvin shook the man’s hand, then watched as he reached into a bag at his side and pulled out a pillow and a fake beard attached to a thin, elastic string. Stan smiled broadly after stuffing the pillow inside his shirt and stringing the beard to his face. Marvin swallowed, struggled for words, then turned and hurried in the other direction.

Near the center of the mall, after pausing to catch his breath, Marvin turned into a side hallway and strode into the main office. He was pleased at the way his angry footsteps rippled the coffee on the desk of his supervisor. “Frank, what’s going on here?”

“Good morning, Santa Marvin. How are you?” Frank said, scratching the top of his bald head.

“Two Santas? Is this a joke? He’s not even with FORBS!”

“Marvin, I know you remember Desoto Square Mall and all their lawsuits. ASS is a perfectly valid organization now.”

“But two Santas? How is that possible?” Marvin said, chest heaving.

“I know it’s not ideal, but management thinks it’ll bring in some more money. Maybe families will walk in one side, pay for a picture with Santa, then get to the other side and the spoiled brats will make them do it all again.”

“That’s baloney, Frank. All this’ll do is confuse people, and we’ll have a bunch of angry parents who have to explain to their kids why there are two of us. And what are you gonna tell them? That you’re trying to ruin Christmas?”

“No one’s trying to ruin Christmas—lighten up a little bit. We’re just trying to make some money, Marvin.”

“That’s Santa Marvin. And I’ll lighten up when that bald-faced impostor is out of here.” He turned quickly and stormed from the office, knowing the mall would open soon.

By 10:00 Marvin’s line already had more than a dozen people in it.

“What do we know about him, Carl?” he asked the short, green-clad man standing beside his throne.

“Nothing yet. I’ve got the SMEL office looking into it.”

Marvin nodded approvingly. The Shopping Mall Elf Legion, sister organization to the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, could be trusted with such an important task. “Ho, ho, ho! And what’s your name, little girl?”

Carl lifted the blonde-haired girl and placed her gently in Marvin’s lap. “Sally Marie Bishop. I’m a very good girl and I want Astronaut Barbie with the Astronaut Barbie Space Shuttle and the Astronaut Barbie Lunar Module.”

Marvin laughed and dragged his hand across his beard. “Well you just keep being good, and Santa will see what he can do. Merry Christmas!”

He nudged Sally slightly to let her know it was time to leave, but she refused to move. “Santa? Are there two of you?”

“Of course not, Sally. There’s only one Santa.”

“Then who’s that man by the toy store?”

Marvin looked toward the east wing. Stanley Altman was out there somewhere, defiling the good name of his mall. “Don’t worry about him, Sally. He is a bad, bad man who is pretending to be something that he’s not.”

“Then why is he here?”

“Santa’s testing you, Sally. If you really are a good girl, then you’ll know which Santa is real, and you will stay far, far away from the one who lies.”

“I know you’re the real Santa, Santa.”

Marvin smiled. “Good girl. Be sure to tell all your friends that.” At lunch on Tuesday, Marvin sat with Carl the Elf as they ate in the storage closet behind American Eagle. “He’s a writer,” Carl said. “He writes stories and articles and shit. Apparently this is his side job, and it’s just

his first year in a mall.”

Marvin shook his head. “Only ASS would certify a skinny writer with no beard and no experience.” He bit into his ham sandwich, ignoring the mustard that smeared his beard. “How do we get rid of him?”

“I don’t know yet. Our contract with the mall doesn’t say anything about not having two Santas. But I’ll keep looking, see if maybe we can pin him with harassment or something.”

“Good.” More ham, more mustard. Marvin reached over and poured Carl another cup of tea. “We need to end this before that asshole kills Christmas.”

“Boss, I thought Santa wasn’t supposed to cuss.”

“Sorry Carl, you’re right. It’s just—it hasn’t even been a week, and I’m already sick of all this.”

“Don’t worry, boss. We’ll take care of it.”

Later that afternoon, Marvin was wiping the sweat from his forehead when a little boy with a green shirt and a mop for hair ran up the steps and jumped into his lap. “Merry Christmas!” Marvin offered with a laugh.

“I want a football!” the boy screamed.

“Well what’s your name, young man?”

“Sammy! And I want a new puppy dog!”

“Have you been good this year?”

“And a G.I. Joe Nerve Gas Warfare Kit!”

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do.”

“And a tarantula!”

“Carl, let’s get Sammy here back to his parents, please.”

Carl the Elf lifted the boy from Marvin’s lap and set him on the stairs leading toward the picture kiosk. “You ready for the next one, Santa Marvin?”

“No, give me just a minute.” Marvin raised a hand to his head, feeling the exaggerated pulse from his temple. “I’ve got a migraine. And I’m depressed. And that Altman bastard is stealing all my kids. He’s destroying Christmas, Carl. You know that? Destroying it. He’s making me do things I haven’t done in years.”

“You want a break?”

“No, no breaks. That would give him the upper hand,” Marvin said, waving his hand and forcing a smile. He noticed the line was shorter than usual. “Is it just a slow day?”

Carl shook his head. “No, boss, it’s not a slow day. Santa Stan’s got cookies for all his kids.”

Marvin’s heart quickened and his rosy cheeks turned crimson. “Don’t you dare call him Santa, Carl. He’s a fucking weasel and he is murdering everything we stand for. And see if you can get us ice cream for tomorrow.”

“Santa, what does fucking mean?”

Marvin turned to the side and was surprised to see Sammy still standing there. “It’s a plant, kid. Merry Christmas.”

After clocking out that afternoon, Marvin saw Stanley Altman walking toward him, beard drooping from his face and pillow protruding to one side. Marvin turned quickly, but it was too late. “Santa Marvin!”

“Bastardfuckingshitasshole,” Marvin hissed as Stanley ran up to him.

“Santa Marvin, I’ve been wanting to talk to you all week.”

“About what, Stan?” Marvin raised his eyebrows and glanced at the exit.

“Well, I hear you’ve been doing this Santa thing for a long time, and a lot of people around here seem to respect you. I was wondering if you had any pointers for me.”

“This Santa thing?”

“Yeah, you know...this job.”

Marvin shook his head and started walking away. “That’s why you’ve got it all wrong, Stan. Santa’s not a job. It’s a life. Don’t talk to me again until you can grow a fucking beard.”

Marvin reached under his bed and pulled out a box, turning to avoid the cloud of dust that followed. This was where he kept those things that were not fitting for Santa’s house. He gazed down the hallway toward the living room to make sure he was alone; the twinkling lights on the walls offered the illusion of movement, but the house was otherwise still. Marvin opened the box and scanned its contents: a pile of magazines, two DVDs, and an antique pistol which had been passed through generations for almost two hundred years. Griggs family legend said that Marvin’s ancestor would invite competitors over for tea before challenging them to a duel.

But the pistol was not what he was looking for. Marvin reached under the magazines and found a tightly folded piece of notebook paper. He slowly lifted each crease and looked at the numbers scrawled on the paper. Reaching for the phone on the bedside table, he froze when he noticed the framed picture of an old man in a Santa outfit. “Sorry, Dad,” he whispered, placing the picture facedown before dialing the number.

“Are you there? It’s Santa Marvin... I’ve been naughty. Do you have any openings tonight?... Okay. I have a hat I want you to wear... And maybe some bells... How much extra?... That’s fine, but I want at least an hour... It’s the house with all the lights on Willow Road. Be sure to come in the back.” He returned the phone to the table and waited, surrounded by silence and dancing white lights.

Frank called Marvin to his desk in the mall office. “We need to talk.”

“What is it?”

“You and I have worked together for a long time,” Frank said with a sigh. “So I wanted to give you a warning before I send a report back to FORBS.”

“A report about what?”

“Well Marvin, I’ve been hearing some things this week that are pretty upsetting. I had a mom the other day tell me you cussed in front of her son. You, Marvin Griggs, cussing in front of little kids.”

“Santa doesn’t cuss, Frank.”

“Well let’s make sure it stays that way.” Frank nervously shifted a pile of papers on his desk. “And I know this is crazy, but there are also reports about you forgetting to say your ho’s. I try to defend you to the parents—I show them all your positive reports and everything. But it’s getting hard, Marvin.”

“Santa Marvin.”

“Right. Listen, people are starting to talk. Alice from Starbucks thinks you’ve lost your spark, and I won’t even tell you what Food Court Cindy said.”

“Hey, I’ve just had a couple off days,” Marvin replied. “This whole two-Santa thing threw me off a little bit, but I’ll get it back.”

“That’s what I want to hear. I’ll be watching you today, and I want lots of smiles and lots of ho’s.”

“You got it.” Marvin stood up and walked toward the door.

“Oh, and you really should give Santa Stan a chance. I’m actually working on a report to send back to ASS about how well he’s doing. He’s a great guy, and I think he wants to learn from you.”

“Sure thing, Frank. I’ll see what I can do.”

Carl the Elf was pacing outside the office, the bells on his hat jingling with every step. “Everything alright, boss?”

“Frank thinks Altman’s doing a better job than me. He even told me—me!—not to forget my ho’s. I’m the best Santa in the tri-county area, dammit.”

“Listen, boss, we can end this. I got a buddy from SMEL who says he can pay Stan a visit if we want. Or there’s this lady friend who might’ve forgotten to tell the cops about what Stan’s done to her, you know what I mean?”

“That’s alright, Carl. Let’s just get to work. I’ll take care of everything.”

That afternoon Marvin went to clock out a few minutes early,

then waited for Stan. He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily when he saw the pillow-bulge and the stringed beard, but he forced himself to smile. “Hey Stan, how are you?”

“Pretty good, Santa Marvin. Look at this!” He lifted his beard and pointed to a thin layer of fuzz clinging to his cheeks. “I’m working on that beard you talked about.”

“Glad to hear it,” Marvin said with another smile. “Listen, I thought maybe you and I could spend some time together. You know, Santa and,” he gulped, “Santa. I know I’ve been a little rough this week, trying to get used to the changes around here, but I think we could be good friends.”

“Yeah, I’d really like that.” He patted Marvin’s shoulder. “Who says an ASS and a FORBS can’t be friends, right?”

“That’s right, Stan. I could have you over to my place tonight, if you’re free. Do you like tea?”

Monday morning Marvin settled into his throne and adjusted his hat. He looked across the mall, smiling proudly. “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it, Carl?”

Carl stood on the steps and nodded. “Sure is, boss. Frank says Stan didn’t show up for work this morning, and look at this—the day’s just starting and we’ve got the longest line of the year.”

“Yeah, I think things are looking up.” Santa Marvin opened his arms for the young boy at the front of the line. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!”